DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 397 194 UD 031 073

AUTHOR Jones, Toni Griego; Marti, Lillian
TITLE Parents as Collaborators in Urban School Reform.
PUB DATE 7 Apr 94
NOTE 18p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the American Educational Research Association (New Orleans, LA, April 4-8, 1994).
PUB TYPE Reports - Evaluative/Feasibility (142) -- Speeches/Conference Papers (150)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Community Organizations; Curriculum Development; Educational Administration; *Educational Change; *Middle Schools; *Parent Participation; Parent School Relationship; *Partnerships in Education; Program Evaluation; School Restructuring; Student Attitudes; *Urban Schools
IDENTIFIERS Edna McConnell Clark Foundation; Milwaukee Public Schools WI; San Diego Unified School District CA

ABSTRACT

Evaluation data are reported from two examples of a comprehensive approach to urban school reform that attempted to involve the full range of stakeholders, including parents, in school reform. The Edna McConnell Clark Foundation awarded grants to five urban school districts to improve middle schools by focusing on high expectations, high content, and high support for student and school efforts. How parents in two study sites, Milwaukee (Wisconsin) and San Diego (California), affected school reform initiatives was studied. The four aspects of schooling that parent activity affected were identified as: (1) parent-teacher relationships; (2) student behavior and perceptions of self; (3) curriculum; and (4) administrative or policy concerns. Parent involvement that was connected to community-based organizations seemed to give the parents a power base from which to operate, and it was evident that the approach that each community-based organization took made a difference in parental ability to influence reform activities. Lessons from these two projects illustrate how effective parents could be when supported by a systematic and coordinated approach. (SLD)

****
* Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made *
* from the original document. *
****

ED 397 194

Parents as Collaborators in Urban School Reform

by

Toni Griego Jones, University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee
and Lillian Marti, Teachers' College, Columbia University

April 7, 1994

American Educational Research Association

New Orleans, LA

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
Office of Educational Research and Improvement
EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)

☒ This document has been reproduced as received from the person or organization originating it.

☐ Minor changes have been made to improve reproduction quality.

• Points of view or opinions stated in this document do not necessarily represent official OERI position or policy.

PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE AND DISSEMINATE THIS MATERIAL HAS BEEN GRANTED BY

Lillian Marti

TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)

UD 031073

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

Parents as Collaborators in Urban School Reform

by Toni Griego Jones & Lillian Marti-Vazquez

Introduction. Clearly, a major lesson learned from attempts to improve schools over the last thirty years is that reform requires comprehensive, holistic approaches to change, approaches that involve all stakeholders and affect all aspects of schooling (Boyer, 1990; Fullan, 1990; King & McGuire, 1992; Martin, 1992; Schorr, 1989). Parents of children in urban schools are unquestionably major stakeholders in the quest to reform city schools. The urban context, however, can make it particularly difficult to involve parents in the improvement of their children's schools. The size, complexity, and economic extremes in cities all contribute to making it difficult for families and schools to connect. But, given the importance of involving parents, it is imperative that reformers study just how to include parents in the improvement of education for their children.

This paper reports on evaluation data from two examples of a comprehensive approach to urban school reform that attempted to involve the full range of stakeholders in school reform. It began in 1989 when the Edna McConnell Clark Foundation granted awards to five urban school districts across the nation to improve middle schools, each according to its own plan. The Foundation funded a five million dollar Program for Disadvantaged Youth in Baltimore, Louisville, Milwaukee, Oakland, and San Diego. Participating middle schools in these cities were challenged to heighten their expectations of students, to upgrade the content of schooling, and to provide all the necessary types of support needed by adolescents at risk.

The five districts planned and organized activities around what the Clark Foundation called the three Highs - High Expectations, High Content, and High Support, believing that only through this type of comprehensive approach could middle school improvement take place. Selected middle schools in each city worked toward the following major objectives as prerequisites to improving the academic achievement of their students.

-Administrators and teachers would change their perceptions, understandings, and instruction of disadvantaged adolescents.

-Administrators, teachers, and support staff would demonstrate high expectations for students' improved academic performance.

-Schools would provide and students would participate in challenging educational experiences requiring reasoning and thinking skills, and mastery of high content materials and concepts.

-Schools would provide high levels of academic, personal, and guidance support services.

-Families and communities would become actively involved in the personal and educational development of the schools' disadvantaged students.

Districts were given these general parameters but were left to make their own plans and the Foundation gave each district one million dollars to use directly within their designated schools over a five year period. The expectation was that improvement would be comprehensive, attacking reform from every direction - supporting students, developing teachers and administrators, involving parents and community, upgrading curriculum, and redesigning the structure of schools to facilitate improvement activities.

Further, the Foundation made grants to an array of technical asssistance groups

specifically to support the five project sites in their efforts. In the first years of the Project, there were over twenty different groups that received Clark funds to make their expertise available to project schools. Among these recipients were the Center for Early Adolescents, the National Foundation for the Improvement of Education, the National Committee for Citizens in Education, and the Algebra Project.

A year into the project, a unique third category of grants from the Clark Foundation was given to some type of community organization located in each of the five cities so that, through their own projects, communities could also support improvement at the selected school sites. In two of the cities, the "community" organizations were universities; in the other, a business group. In Milwaukee and San Diego however, community based organizations with long established records of working with parents and families received the Clark grants to assist in the reform initiative. The community organizations, The Greater Milwaukee Educational Trust and San Diego's June Burnett Institute for Children, Youth and Families, submitted proposals that called for the involvement of parents in a proactive way, as major stake holders in supporting middle school reform.

Settings. Milwaukee designated two middle schools to be part of the Clark Initiative. These schools were located in low-income neighborhoods, one in an African American community and the other in a heavily Hispanic community. In July 1990, the Greater Milwaukee Educational Trust hired two community organizers, one for each middle school in the project and named their project The Empowerment Project. Both organizers were well known in their respective communities and were already skilled in organizing parents. Although the organizers worked out of offices in the schools, it was clearly understood that they worked for parents and

the Milwaukee Trust. They provided or arranged for parent training, established Parent Centers at the schools as access points for visiting parents, made extensive home visits during the summer to discuss the needs of students with parents and to find out what needed to happen in order for them to become more connected to their children's school experience.

The June Burnett Institute in San Diego also engaged individuals from the community who worked closely with parents and were aware of their concerns. They hired the services of community based organizations (CBOs) that represented the ethnic groups within the schools in order to form a consortium of agencies. Each CBO was then given part of the Institute's grant funds to pay for a part-time staff person to conduct school and home visits to identify issues of concern, to recruit parents for training sessions, and to help them follow up on issues. Since both schools had large Latino student populations, the Chicano Federation and the Parent Institute were contracted to be part of the consortium. The Association of Pan American Agencies was hired to represent the Asian student community and the Urban League to reach the African American community.

In general, the two cities' community proposals had the following elements in common. Their purpose was to promote and facilitate collaboration of schools, parents, and community in achieving the goal of the Clark Initiative - to improve student achievement by providing high support, high expectations, and high content to students. Both projects were oriented toward empowering parents by increasing their understanding of the context of schools and enabling them to take more active roles in their children's education. Expected outcomes in both cases included improved student attendance rates, lower suspension rates, and improved grades. Both empowerment projects had parent coordinators housed at each project school (two schools in

each city). Student populations in both cities' schools were predominantly minority, 97.7 % African American at one Milwaukee school, 57% Latino and 17% African American at the other. In San Diego, one school was 26% Asian, 26% Latino, 23% African American; in the other, 36% were Latino. Both community organizations' projects then, were heavily oriented toward minority communities.

Parents' Impact on Schools' Reform. The question of how parents in Milwaukee and San Diego, through the Clark community based projects, impacted the implementation of the middle grades reform initiative in their schools is the focus of this paper. The paper is not an evaluation of the community organizations' projects, but rather, an analysis of how parent involvement generated by those projects contributed to each city's reform initiative within the schools. The analysis is done from the perspective of the schools, that is, from the vanatage point of an observer inside the school looking at what the parent activity affected. The analysis attempts to define the "points of contact" between parents and schools relative to the objectives of the Clark reform initiative.

Data Collection. Documentation of the Edna McConnell Clark Initiative in the five cities was conducted by an outside documentation team, Education Resources Group, Inc., and data collection methods included on-site documentation as well as a series of structured in-person and telephone interviews with over three hundred teachers and administrators; with coordinators from community based organizations' projects; and with parents. The authors were part of the documentation team (one was on-site and the other was from outside) which made four to six formal site visits per year over a four year period to each district. Additionally, students completed annual surveys on career awareness, attitudes toward school and school climate, and

critical thinking skills. School districts supplied student data on attendance, suspensions, and academic achievement.

Findings. The data identified four aspects of schooling that were affected by parents working in the two funded projects. These parental points of contact in the overall implementation of the Clark reform initiative were: 1) parent-teacher relationships, 2) student behavior and perceptions of self, 3) curriculum, and 4) administrative or policy concerns. Not every aspect of the Clark initiative in the middle schools was touched by the parents' involvement. For example, activities like rescheduling classes to block longer periods of time for instruction and organizing teachers and students into teams, were accomplished solely by school personnel.

Parent-teacher relationships. Relationships between parents and teachers were altered in a number of ways, from the subtle to very concrete. For example, parent involvement generated by these projects focused attention in a subtle way on assumptions parents and teachers held about each other. A prevailing assumption among many teachers was that the parents, especially minority parents, weren't interested in education. But, as organizers in Milwaukee and San Diego listened to parents and taught them how to access the school, this training enabled them to express their interests and concerns and to actively advocate on behalf of their children's.

In San Diego, the Parent Institute conducted a series of eight sessions with parents from both schools. The central theme of the training sessions was to teach parents "how to work the system" in order to get issues resolved, e.g., complaints about grades, questions about placement of students in special education programs, tutoring needs, obtaining translated materials, scheduling meetings with teachers and administrators, and so forth.

In Milwaukee, home visits and other communications with parents served to find out

directly from parents what they were concerned about and how they viewed the education of their children. Encouraging parents to ask questions and be informed about school practices resulted in more open discussions with teachers and in negotiations of parents' roles, especially of minority parents' roles, rights, and responsibilities. Teachers could not assume that parents were not interested, rather they began to understand that avenues for communication had not always been understood or automatic in the past.

In a more concrete example of altered relationships in both districts, parents began to influence the staff development that was provided to teachers. Partly due to parents' input and the community organizations' proposals, teachers received inservice funded by the Clark Foundtion about cultural backgrounds of minority students. The staff development was aimed at promoting better understanding on the part of teachers about the racial and ethnically different students they teach. Some of this staff development was conducted by the technical resource groups such as the Center for Early Adolescence and focused on cultural diversity. In all schools there was evidence of increased awareness of, and appreciation for, parents. But, in the predominantly African American school in Milwaukee in particular, improvement of race relations became a topic for staff inservice, and in San Diego, improvement of race relations was the focus of mediation sessions between school staff and parents..

Another way parents influenced the development of teachers in both cities was through their volunteer work in classrooms. By contributing their special skills and knowledge in the classroom, they demonstrated to teachers that their homes and cultural groups had something to offer schools. In Milwaukee, parents made presentations to teachers at several different training sessions about their cultural backgrounds and both organizers very deliberately worked at

promoting a new respect for parents on the part of teachers. Just getting to know parents and realizing their knowledge and skills elevated them in many teachers' eyes.

Attention to the economic/cultural differences between teachers and minority students **and** the mediating role of parents in helping teachers to understand those differences was an important result of the community organizations' involvement. Although not all teachers in all project schools received the benefit of learning from parents, the successful instances of having parents inform staff development and/or directly teach teachers suggested that more attention should be directed toward altering the traditional teacher/parent relationship. Given that the majority of teachers are from white, middle class, small town backgrounds so different from that of the students they teach, the "role" reversal approach may be a greatly underutilized means of bridging the gap between teachers and parents.

Student Behavior and Perceptions of Self. In both cities, projects organized parent visits to project schools. As parents visited schools and classrooms, they also became more aware of what students were being taught, how they were treated, and how their children behaved in school. This greater awareness on the part of parents in some cases altered child/parent relationships. For example, several project activities caused parents to monitor their children's attendance more regularly. At the two Milwaukee schools, parents received phone calls early in the morning when their child was not in school. This was part of the High Expectations Program which Parent Coordinators helped to organize. Teachers and project organizers reported improved attendance, averaging 90% attendance for those in this program at the end of the first year of the program. Other teachers reported changes in student behavior and perceptions of self, in homework completion, and family and community mediation of conflicts. The Brother 2

Brother and Sister 2 Sister Programs in one Milwaukee school also introduced African American students to community mentors hoping to promote self-esteem, social interaction skills, and brotherhood among the students.

In both districts, parent visits resulted in awareness of inequity within the schools resulted in a more focused advocacy for children. Minority parents in one San Diego school in particular, were awakened to the lives of their children in the school to which they were bused. Neighborhood parents in this school's affluent community had always been involved in all aspects of school operations and had a strong leadership group which coordinated fund-raising activities, social events, school fairs, and so forth. Minority parent involvement, on the other hand, had traditionally centered around special events like Cinco de Mayo until the June Burnett Institute program started.

The first step minority parents in the San Diego school took towards active involvement was requesting to be invited for a school tour. Parents commented that their visit made them more aware of teacher-student relationships and programs offered in the school as they were exposed to the materials and curricula use d in class. For most of the parents bused into the school, this was the first time they had direct contact with the whole school environment. After two years of training sessions funded by the Clark Initiative, Latino parents at the school presented a series of demands to the administration, outlining a series of complaints regarding programs. Complaints included: lack of support to students to enable them to attend an after school tutoring session; in-school suspension practices seemed unfair and ethnically biased; lack of administrative support for a mentoring program for minority students; and lack of representation in Student Governance and in PTA. They requested a redistribution of leadership

in the Governance Council and permanent minority parent representation in meetings, a review of student organizations to include minority students, a review of the Gifted programs, changes in special education programs (in assessment and placement), creation of a student newspaper, and a review of the discipline code. Increased parent support and advocacy resulted in promoting Latino student leadership as the school revised the process for selecting students for the Student Council. Minority parents were regularly invited to PTA meetings and the Gifted program was redesigned to include all students and eliminate tracking.

In Milwaukee, as African American parents backed a new African American principal at one school, children again felt the influence of their parents' advocacy and support when parents started questioning why African American history and culture were not part of the curriculum. Parents sat in on classes and the positive change in school climate and discipline was strikingly apparent to all who entered the school. Thus, Milwaukee and San Diego parents got closer to their children as they became visible advocates for them in important areas of their school life.

Curriculum. A third area affected by parents' and community organizations' involvement was curriculum. There was increased pressure to acknowledge the identities of the diverse student populations and to include them, their histories, and cultures in the schools' overall curriculum. Although this pressure was not new, it now came from parents who now had a home base in the schools. Because the parents were an immediate and consistent presence, their pressure may have had a more permeating effect than previous requests or suggestions from outside groups or curriculum specialists.

An important finding was that integration of culturally sensitive material into the school's curriculum was more easily accomplished and more visible at the Milwaukee school whose

student population was almost totally from one group, that is 97.7% African American. In the other schools where student populations were more mixed (although Latino students constituted a majority or significant percentage), curriculum that was sensitive to minority students was more difficult to define and agree upon. In those schools, documented changes in curriculum were less frequent and apparent.

Policy and Administrative Concerns. In the fourth area, policy and administrative concerns, there were more examples of how the community organizations' parent involvement affected Clark implementation than in any of the first three areas. Examples here ranged from parents' demands for more African American teachers in one city to increased representation of Latino parents on school governance committees in another.

When parents at the predominantly African American school in Milwaukee learned that African American teachers couldn't be hired because the school already had its "share" of African American teachers as per affirmative action guidelines, they lobbied the school board for more because they felt it was important that the school have more role models for their children. They were not successful in acquiring more teachers for that building but their rationale succeeded in getting the district to allow the Milwaukee African American Immersion School to have more than the "quota" of African American teachers. Parents also organized a drive to change the name of the Clark Initiative school to honor the first African American principal of that school. They were successful in getting the students and faculty to vote in favor of the name change and submitted it for approval to the school board.

In most cases of parent organizing to impact school policy, the attention is on addressing school or central office administration. In San Diego's case, the parents also addressed the

established parent leaderhsip group, the Parent Teacher Association (PTA). In both schools the minority parents' new activism caused the PTA to became interested in updating their "inter-ethnic understanding of cultural groups". They decided they wanted to sensitize the white majority membership to reach out towards minority parent involvement. Project Hope, a component of PTA, took the leadership in this area. At the time documentation ended, Project Hope was interested in hiring a minority parent to work in updating the structure of the PTA and discussions were initiated to involve more minority parents in PTAs. The issue of having Boards that are not representing the student population was discussed. It was a common feeling among the Partnership members that the Board's perspectives changed in a positive way regarding minority involvement.

Factors Affecting Parents'Impact. Documentation over a three year period demonstrated that parents did affect the reform activity within each project school in the four areas discussed above. Although there are many examples of successful parent training in the literature on parent involvement, the involvement of parents in the Clark Initiative was more coordinated with the school site activities as a result of being funded by the same source and developing goals and objectives as a part of the "total package".

In addition, parent involvement that was connected to community based organzations seemed to give the parents a power base from which to operate. Since community organizations in both cities had an established structure and reputation, they were able to provide training and resources readily and effectively. Parents only needed to access their expertise, not start from scratch. Experience in these two cities as well as many other studies contributes to a better understanding of how community based organizations can be utilized in the struggle to improve

schools. Indeed, these types of organizations may be the most effective way to connect minority parents to school improvement efforts. Further, there may be certain structures or features of projects involving community organizations that make for more effective and meaningful parent involvement. The evaluation of the Clark project suggests that the way in which community organizations were positioned relative to schools might have made a difference in how easily parents were involved. A comparison of the two project structures and features identified factors that affected parents' ability to impact/support the Clark reform initiative in the schools. Identifying these factors is important to facilitating the inclusion of minority parents into the process of change in schools. In the past, minority parents have often had to depend on lawsuits and legislation to have a voice in policy relative to changing conditions in schools. If community based organizations could facilitate minority parents' involvement and influence in helping with reform efforts, this would greatly advance the urban school reform agenda by allowing parents to be collaborators rather than reactors to decisions made by school personnel.

There were key differences in the respective designs of the two community based projects that may have determined how effective the CBOs were in facilitating parent influence in the schools' reform activity. The approach that each community based organization took to structure its program made a difference in parents' ability to influence the activity surrounding the Clark Initiative in schools. For example, one difference between the two community projects was in the hiring of the parent coordinators. In both cases, parent coordinators were funded by Clark Foundation grants, but in Milwaukee, parent coordinators were selected and hired by The Milwaukee Trust. They were chosen because of their strong records as community activists and advocates for educational opportunities for minority children. Parent coordinators in San Diego,

on the other hand, were selected and hired by the school principals and supervised by school personnel. The empowerment of parents was stronger in Milwaukee where parent organizers clearly were working for parents, not the school system. This difference may be important as reform literature is filled with instances of principals and school personnel co-opting parents in school governance and policy decisions. Documentation of parent coordinators' activities and their relative autonomy from principals' supervision in these two projects tended to support the literature on this point - relative control of parents by school personnel. The parent organizers in Milwaukee were not supervised by the principals as they were in San Diego. They were only accountable to the Trust, and even there, they were accountable for empowering parents, not completing tasks assigned by school personnel. Consequently, although both cities had increased parent involvement, it seemed more powerful and pervasive in Milwaukee.

Another way that CBOs facilitated parent involvement was the autonomy afforded by outside funding from the Clark Foundation. This enabled minority parents to speak to school personnel on more equal terms and to speak with powerful community support behind them. It is important to note that both community organizations involved in these projects are respected members of the "establishment" in both cities. The training, resources, and credibility of those organizations supported parents in their attempts to collaborate with schools.

A final part of the analysis compared parent involvement across all five sites. The Clark community grantees in the three other cities were university or business based. Even so, all districts receiving Clark funds had targeted parent involvement as a goal and all attempted to include parents in the improvement of their middle schools. Using the same four parental points of contact to analyze parent involvement in the implementation of the Clark Initiative, however,

documentation indicated that parent participation in Milwaukee and San Diego was more active, visible, and viable.

Summary. Lessons from these two projects are significant as they again demonstrate how parents, (especially those from traditionally non-represented minority groups) who are unquestionably key stakeholders in improvement of schools for their children, can contribute to school reform. Some of the findings are not particulary new or unique, but the systematic, coordinated approach to achieving common goals (High Expectations, High Content, High Support) by parents, outside technical assistance groups, and school personnel allowed all reform activity to be focused. The extensive funding from the McConnell Clark Foundation to the community based groups as well as to the schools and other technical assistance groups was a key factor in the ability of parents to have an impact on the changes that took place in their children's schools. Further, the attempt to define a supporting role for community organizations in these two examples of urban school reform efforts is important as the school change process becomes more effective when all key stake holders, including parents, are supported and involved in developing common perspectives and approaches in the complex work of improving schools.

References

Boyer, Ernest L. (1990). In S. Bacharach (Ed.), Educational reform, making sense of it all. Boston: Allyn and Bacon.

Fullan, M. (1990). The meaning of educational change. New York: Teachers College Press.

King, R.A. & McGuire, C.K. (1992). In Cibulka, J.G., Reed, R.J., & Wong, K.K. (Eds.), The politics of urban education in the United States. New York: The Falmer Press.

Martin, J.R. (1992). The schoolhome. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

Schorr, L.B. (1989). Within our reach. New York: Doubleday.